

The Editorial P

Editorial

Don't Save Up Compliments For Funerals

Everybody needs a few compliments and encouragement, and there's nothing like positive feedback to get what you want out of public officials.

A woman who went every place either alone or accompanied only by family members, died suddenly when she was just barely past 30. As far as we could tell, she didn't have a circle of friends, or even a single confidant. She was very shy, or a better word to describe her might be "withdrawn".

An overflow crowd filled the church for her funeral. Four speakers talked extensively about what a wonderful person the deceased was. According to them, she was an outstanding mother and wife, a skilled homemaker, a wonderful cook and seamstress, and a talented musician. She was dedicated to her church work and volunteered regularly to help with PTA and her children's school projects. Even though people who speak at funerals are generally close friends of the deceased, all the speakers expressed regret about not having known her better and not one seemed to be a close friend. No one who spoke, or who we talked to after the funeral, seemed to really know her. They only knew about her.

From what we could tell, none of those people ever told the woman any of the nice things they said about her at the funeral. We were only at the funeral to provide some music, and had never met her. But we found ourselves grieving very deeply, not because she had died, but because she apparently died without knowing how respected and admired she was. We resolved to make sure that when we appreciated a person's skills or character, we let them know it while they were alive to enjoy that little bit of praise, not stand up and tell other people about it after they were dead.

No matter how self-respecting and self-sufficient we are, how healthy our so-called self images may be, we all need to hear a little praise once in a while, a little assurance that we're doing a pretty good job of whatever we're doing. Even when we know we're doing something the best we can, and have confidence that we're doing it well, a little positive feedback keeps us going at it longer than we thought we could, and inspires us to do it just a little better.

It's easy to gripe at people and about what they do, and most of us do that a lot. We cuss their driving, gossip about how they treat their spouses, or complain about how they act when they wait on us in stores. We tell off

our elected officials and public employees when we think they've wronged us or are spending our money inappropriately. We fill meeting halls during public hearings when we don't approve of a public project.

We don't recall anybody ever stopping a person to compliment her on being a courteous driver, or telling a man how much we admire how he shows his love for his wife, or thanking a store clerk for being so pleasant after 7-1/2 hours on an extra busy day. Not many people tell public officials about it when they like how they're conducting public business, or that they appreciate how quickly a pot hole was filled. We seldom attend public hearings to say we like a proposal.

This all leads to two points we'd like to make.

The first is to encourage people who, understandably, are shy about going out of their way to praise people they barely know. For some reason that seems to embarrass us. But no one ever gets mad at a person who delivers a sincere compliment, even if it's a stranger. If someone you barely know says, "You must be a very good parent. Your kids are terrific," you can't help but float on a longlasting "high". The effect would be somewhat diminished if it were said over your coffin.

The second point is (forgive us) political. Public officials tend to chalk it up to indifference when nobody shows up at public hearings, or calls to support them in something they're trying to accomplish. We don't think it's indifference. We think it's that people tend to be silent when they are contented, and their silence should be interpreted as approval.

Letting local decision-makers know when we like what they're doing, as well as when we don't, can accomplish several things: a) They'll be able to gauge public opinion more accurately, rather than just knowing who's "against" because they show up or call to say so; b) it will give them a little shot in the arm to keep on doing what they're doing; and c) those that aren't doing such a hot job might change their ways once they get thanked for some little thing they've done right and find out how good it feels to make their constituents happy.

Besides, with all the griping and complaining most of us do, it's only right to give equal time and attention to people when they do something positive, before they die or leave office. Waiting until afterward doesn't do anybody a lick of good.